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Protestant Schools in a Secular Society: the Dutch case

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ABSTRACT *The paper presents the results of a Delphi-research project on the ideal Protestant junior school (15 respondents participated). The group comprised head teachers, teachers, board members of Protestant junior schools and academics. Although consensus could not be achieved on many aspects, it is possible to describe ideals for the Protestant school underwritten by almost all respondents. Knowledge of the Christian faith, and believing and acting in accordance with it are considered the basis for deciding aims, teaching methods and organisational structure in these schools. A major distinction is made between the beliefs of the teachers, who must be practising Christians, and those of the parents, who may have different beliefs. In a secular and multicultural society the Protestant school will emphasize the Christian faith, but will also teach children to respect people of other faiths.*

Introduction

Since 1917 Christian schools have had the same legal financial position as state schools. Governed by a school board or corporation these schools have freedom of direction and freedom of organization within general criteria laid down by the state.

Since 1960 secularization, individualization and de-christianization have had tremendous effects on Dutch society as well as on denominational schools. These changes have created an urgent problem for Dutch Christian schools. How are they to give form and content to their identity? This is especially urgent because these societal changes have had no effect on the number of Christian schools in The Netherlands: two-thirds of the Dutch junior schools are Christian. The traditional view of Christian schools has been broken up into a variety of cultural views, ranging from those which accord primacy to knowledge of Christian culture in which knowledge of the bible is a central tenet, to those which see the formation of a personally integrated and committed attitude to life as the main aim (Miedema & de Ruyter, 1995; De Ruyter & Miedema, 1996).

In this paper we present various views on Protestant junior schools, which resulted from a Delphi-research project. This project focused on the ideals concerning Protestant junior schools in Dutch society today and in the near future.

In the next section we will describe briefly the method used and the way in which we have organized the research. The third section describes some of the insights gained. In the fourth and last section we will formulate our conclusions.

Method and Organization of our Delphi-research Project

The Delphi-method is appropriate for investigating people's ideals and ideas, because participants not only describe but also reflect upon their ideas. The respondents are asked to give arguments for their position and to deliberate on their own and others' views in several rounds of discussion. The aim is to reach a consensus among the participants.

Two core elements of the Delphi-method can be distinguished. Firstly, the participants all have to be experts on the subject-matter. Secondly, the researcher anticipates several question rounds among the participants in trying to reach a consensus (Linstone & Turoff, 1977).

The experts selected for this research were head teachers, teachers, board members of Protestant junior schools and academics acquainted with the issue of Christian schools. After three rounds, there were 15 respondents left of the 25 who had accepted our invitation to participate: four head teachers, four teachers, three board members and four academics. Twelve of the respondents are men, the mean age being 45 (36–68 years) and all are confirmed and practising members of a wide spectrum of mainly Protestant churches. The schools with which the head teachers, teachers and board members are associated are situated right across The Netherlands in both cities and villages. There were major differences among the schools in two respects; firstly the percentage of immigrant pupils (range: 0–75%) and secondly the percentage of pupils with a belief other than Protestantism (range: 0–95%). For the teachers these ranges are significantly smaller (0–15% and 0–20%).

The questionnaire for the first round was similar for all four groups, but formulated according to the situation of the specific groups. The questions were subsumed under five headings:

- (1) the specific aims of Protestant education;
- (2) teaching methods in the classroom;
- (3) organisational aspects of a Protestant junior school;
- (4) the attitude of Protestant schools to a secularized and multicultural Dutch society; and
- (5) the most desirable future for Protestant schools.

The respondents were instructed to give their opinion and not to describe factual situations. The first round had two functions: (a) to obtain opinions and arguments, and (b) to generate new questions. The questionnaires were analyzed in line with these two aims. Additionally, the ranking the respondents had given for the items per section were analyzed by means of a Kendall analysis.

In the second round all respondents received a similar questionnaire, which focused on the arguments. The first aim was to achieve more agreement among the respondents. The second aim was to get more sophisticated arguments about what makes a school a Protestant school and why the respondents hold this opinion. We analyzed the arguments of the respondents and examined their reasons for changing or adhering to their opinion. The outcomes of the second round were used to construct the questionnaire for the third round.

In the third round every respondent received a unique personal questionnaire, i.e. per item the respondent was confronted with his/her own opinion and arguments in relation to the view of the others. Reaching agreement was the most important aim of this last round.

TABLE I. A survey of the items regarding the aims of Protestant education

Aims of Protestant schools, in order of importance according to the respondents , after the third round	N
1 Children understand and share the value of Christian faith	14
2 Children act according to a Christian world view	14
3 Children have knowledge of Christian values	14
4 Children have knowledge of the content of the bible	all
5 Children have a concept of good from a biblical perspective	12
6 Celebration of Christian festivals	12
7 Teaching science, geography or history from a Christian perspective	14
8 Children are acquainted with other religions or world views	10
9 Children have knowledge of the practices of Christian religion	13
10 Children have a personal interaction, relation with God	10
11 <i>Children believe that (Protestant) Christianity is the only true religion</i>	11*
12 <i>Children are (professing) members of Protestant churches</i>	all

*11 respondents do not consider this a desirable aim.
Majority not important: in italics.
N= 15.

Some Results

We can only present some of the outcomes of our research project. All the items in each section are described but not all the arguments are presented.

Aims of Protestant Education

Ad 1 (Table I) Children understand and share the values of Christian faith. Many respondents argue that Christian values constitute the meaning of life. Several respondents are of the opinion that Jesus instructed us to strive for this. There are also arguments in which the value of Christian faith is described more instrumentally, that it is, for example, important for the child or for society. Participants disagreed more strongly on these ideas.

One head teacher argued that this is not a valuable or relevant aim, because faith has to be lived; it is not a mere agreement with dogmatically formulated religious truths. Many respondents do not share this argument. Some claim that transmitting the value of Christian faith is not related to dogmas at all.

Ad 8 (Table I) Children are acquainted with other religions or world views. Two head teachers, one teacher, an educationalist, and a board member do not think this aim is desirable. Two of them argue that such an aim is not specific to Protestant schools. One does not want to endorse this aim because only the Christian world view can redeem us.

Arguing in favour of this aim, respondents state that respect for other cultures is important, that children have to learn to behave with respect toward other believers. One respondent hopes that in teaching children to understand one another's beliefs and faith the value of the Christian message itself might, in practice, receive more attention.

One respondent holds the view that this aim is important, but states that we have to be cautious. There is a difference between informing pupils about other traditions and passing on these beliefs.

Ad 11 (Table I) Children believe that (Protestant) Christianity is the only true religion. For two head teachers and two teachers this is indeed an aim to strive for. They offer three reasons for their position: (a) the Christian world view is good and therefore we should tell children about it; (b) Christian schools can only celebrate the birth of Jesus and not the births of other founders; and (c) the aim is not Christianity, but knowing the person and work of Jesus Christ and God the Father as the unique truth.

Counter arguments are: (a) other world views and their believers would be wronged and this approach is blocking the path toward meaningful encounters among different religious groups; (b) this direction is dangerous because it can lead children to take up fundamentalist stances; and (c) it is not Christianity that is important, but the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

In analyzing the arguments which arose in this section we noticed two underlying differences. To test our ideas, we drew up two statements which summarize what we saw as fundamental differences in position, and presented them in the last questionnaire.

The first real contention concerns religious education in the school: should this be conceptualised as teaching *about* religion or as teaching *into* religion? The difference can crudely be described as follows: in teaching about a religion, the teacher approaches religion as subject-matter about which he gives information, for instance on the history of the religion. In teaching into a religion, the teacher intends the child to become a true believer of the faith he/she is teaching into (Astley, 1994). Ten respondents plead for teaching *into* Christianity. One respondent remarks that this should be done without coercion and manipulation: individuals have to make their own choices. Others argue for teaching about Christianity only. One of them says that in a school where 70% of the children are from non-Christian families, this can be the only legitimate strategy. Two respondents claim that parents and the church are primarily responsible for nurturing and teaching the children into a religion; this is not a task for the school.

The second contention is the participants' underlying theological view of the uniqueness of Christian faith. For six respondents Christian belief is the only true belief. Seven respondents say that Christian belief is one of several beliefs, but true for them. Unfortunately, the respondents did not offer any arguments for their positions.

Teaching Methods in the Classroom

Table II shows that although it was not possible to reach consensus on most of the items, there was only a small number of respondents who held different opinions, with the exception of items 2 and 7. Item 7: the respondents agree that the content of the bible should be offered to the children, but have different ideas about how it should be done i.e. whether to read directly from the bible or to tell bible stories. Especially for younger pupils some of our respondents prefer teachers to tell bible stories rather than to read the bible itself.

Ad 1 (Table II) The teacher acts according to Christian values. The main argument for most of the respondents is that the teacher is an example for the children. Secondly, the respondents argue that where life and learning are contradictory the message is debased. The respondents are divided over the argument whether or not God meets children through their lives with surrounding adults.

TABLE II. A survey of the items concerning teaching methods in the classroom

Teaching methods in the classroom, in order of importance according to the respondents, after the third round	N
1 The teacher acts in accordance with Christian values	14
2 The teacher stimulates children to interact according to Christian values	12
3 Christian religious education	all
4 Celebrating Christian festivals in the classroom	13
5 Assembly in the classroom	all
6 Praying together in the classroom	all
7 Reading from the bible in the classroom	12
8 The teacher introduces Christian values in subject matter where these can be raised naturally	13
9 Offering projects on ethical matters in the classroom	14
10 Singing psalms and hymns in the classroom	14

N= 15.

Half of the respondents agree with the argument that the desirability of this premise depends on the values the teacher acts upon.

Ad 4 (Table II) Celebrating Christian festivals in the classroom. Many respondents argue that festivals are part of the Christian faith and thus an important element in religious education. Some argue that celebrations further the feeling of community among children. Others state that the work of Jesus must be celebrated.

Some prefer celebrations with the school community as a whole rather than individual classes whilst others maintain that celebrations should be reserved for the church community.

Ad 6 (Table II) Praying together in the classroom. The respondents argue that this is important because: (a) it shows worship and devotion to God; (b) the religious dimension can be experienced; (c) it is a meditative moment; and (d) children need to learn how to pray and to practise talking with God. Most of the respondents do not share the argument that praying together furthers the feeling of community among the children. One of them states that the terms in which this argument is formulated are too secular.

Organisational Aspects of Protestant Junior Schools

Many items were offered to the respondents about the ways in which a Protestant school can give form to organizational matters. We restrict ourselves here to three clusters, namely: faith of the teachers and the parents, Christian content of the curriculum, Christian attitude of teachers and pupils.

For most items we asked the respondents not only if they considered them important for Protestant schools but also if they believed them to be essential aspects of Protestant schools in general. These answers are integrated in the Tables in the following sections.

TABLE III. A survey of the items concerning the faith of the teachers

Items (in random order)	Important?	If not, a Protestant school?	
		yes	no
Teachers are confirmed members of the church	4	12	3
Teachers are Christian believers	13	4	11
Teachers endorse the Christian objectives of the school	all		
Teachers endorse the foundations of the school	12		
The majority of the teachers are not Protestant, but do not take a stance against it		2	13
The majority of the teachers do not work from within the Christian tradition			all

N = 15.

Faith of the Teachers and the Parents

We have formulated six items on the faith of the teachers. Table III shows the evaluation by the respondents. We asked the respondents to rank the first four items. A Kendall analysis shows that ‘teachers are Christian believers’ is the most important, immediately followed by ‘teachers endorse the Christian objectives of the school’. The least important item is that teachers are confirmed and practising members of the church. What arguments do the respondents provide for their position?

Ad 2 (Table III) The teachers are Christian believers. One head teacher and one researcher do not think this aspect is important. One of them says that in his school, with many Muslim and Hindu children, a Muslim or Hindu teacher could also be assigned if he was willing to endorse the central principle of a meeting between the religions.

Many respondents take the view that it is important that teachers are Christian believers, because teachers play an important role in creating the Christian identity of the school. This identity is only visible if the teachers endorse it. Some respondents think that the teachers can only be the full medium of the Holy Spirit if they are personally attached to the Christian faith. Finally, one respondent states that the presence of non-believing teachers could lead to a charade: I do not believe, but I have to pray with the children so let me do my Christian trick.

Most of the respondents claim that a school with teachers who are not Christian believers is not a Protestant school, because living and teaching are one. The teacher has to be a model of the life of a Christian believer. Ideas about what is acceptable within the identity of a Protestant school run as follows: (a) persons of another denomination or of another belief can be appointed as teachers if they underwrite the aims of the school and if the majority of the teachers are Protestant; (b) it is desirable but not essential that the teachers are believers; and (c) sometimes endorsement of the school’s objectives by new teachers is the most feasible option.

Ad 6 (Table III) The majority of the teachers do not work either from or within the Christian tradition. The majority of the respondents think that a school in which this situation prevails is not a Protestant school, because the reason for its designation as such has disappeared. A lesser number of respondents think a school in which this

TABLE IV. A survey of items about the Christian content of the curriculum

Items (in random order)	Important ?	If not, Protestant school?	
		yes	no
Christian religious education is obligatory	14		
Christian religious education should be part of subjects like history	all		
Subject-matter meets the standards of the Protestant foundation	12	1	14
Learning (critically) about different religions is obligatory	14	6	9
Singing Christian songs and hymns is obligatory	10		

N = 15.

situation prevails is no longer a Protestant school because parents cannot be assured of its Protestant character. The respondents differ in their evaluation of the argument that a situation such as this might lead to a permissive sphere and that there is only one path to salvation.

When a similar question is posed in regard to the parents we see a quite different position. None of the respondents is of the opinion that parents should be Christian believers. The majority claims that accepting or respecting the vision of the school is sufficient. Some respondents state that even this is unimportant because everyone should have the opportunity to come into contact with the Christian belief.

The arguments given for supporting the position that parents should be Christian believers are shared by many respondents, but are not valued highly. The arguments are: (a) the pedagogical approach in the school is a continuation of the home situation; and (b) that parents influence the school.

Almost all respondents think that a school is still a Protestant school when it accepts non-Christian pupils. The openness of Christian schools is mentioned in many responses. One respondent states that the presence of other beliefs does not make the school a less Christian one, but that, in his view, the school is no longer specifically Protestant. Most of the respondents agree with this argument. One respondent states that while the Protestant character of the school may be influenced, its character is not defined by the presence of other beliefs.

All respondents agree that parents should be clearly informed about the identity of the school when they enrol their children.

Christian Content of the Curriculum

Ad 2 (Table IV) Christian religious education should be part of subjects like history. Most of the respondents think this important, because it allows pupils to discover that faith embraces all aspects of life. Another important argument is that this shows that the identity of the school is all-encompassing and is not restricted to the specific subject of religious education. The respondents differ in their evaluation of the argument that biblical values should play a role during the entire school day and that all knowledge should be imparted to children in the light of the bible. One of the respondents says that this is not feasible because the bible is not a textbook on biology or geography.

TABLE V. A survey of items on the Christian attitude of teachers and pupils

Items (in random order)	Important?	If not, Protestant school?	
		yes	no
In meetings, teachers discuss the pupils with respect	all	1	14*
Teachers talk about each other respectfully	all	1	14*
Teachers are mindful of the religious aspects of the school in their intercourse with one another	all		
Pupils are not corrected when they do not maintain Christian values in interacting with each other		1	14

*This item was formulated as follows: Teachers are not corrected when they do not act according to the Christian norms and values.
N= 15.

Christian Attitude of Teachers and Pupils

Table V shows that every respondent judges it important that teachers and pupils act respectfully toward each other and in accordance with Christian values. One respondent argues that acting according to Christian values is not an exclusive characteristic of Protestant schools; it is important in every school.

Arguments that were given for the importance of particular items were:

- (1) the aims of the school and the conduct of the teachers must be coherent;
- (2) every child is a God-given subject who should be treated with respect; and
- (3) respecting others is inherent to the Christian stance.

Some respondents think that a general awareness of the religious aspects of the school in the day to day relations between pupils and teachers is important because this contributes to the development of the school’s identity.

TABLE VI. A survey of the items concerning secularization and multiculturalism

Items (in random order)	N
1 Teaching about the Christian religion	all
2 Offering knowledge about Christianity and its culture	all
3 Children realize the value of Christianity and its culture	all
4 <i>Trying to convert non-Christian pupils</i>	12
5 Acquainting children with other cultures	all
6 Children realize the value of other cultures	13
7 Children respect other cultures	all
8 Helping children to acquire a cultural identity	all
9 <i>Children are proud of their own culture</i>	10
10 Children realize the value of their own culture	14
11 Teaching skills in associating with pupils from other cultures	14
12 Prohibiting racism at school	all
13 Punishing racist remarks	all
14 Admitting pupils with a different religion to the school	11
15 Providing a Christian contribution to society	14
16 <i>Supporting Muslims/Hindus</i>	11

Majority not important: in italics.
N= 15.

Protestant Schools in a Secularized and Multicultural Society

Tables VI shows that there is a consensus on half the items concerning the position of Protestant schools in a secularized and multicultural society. Compared to the other sections this is extremely high. We cannot explain this outcome, but we would point to the fact that five respondents did not agree with the aim 'Children are acquainted with other religions and world views' (see Table I) whilst here all respondents agree on the item 'Acquainting the children with other cultures'.

Ad 3 (Table VI) Children realize the value of Christianity and its culture. Most of the respondents subscribe to this aim, because it gives children the opportunity to define their own point of view. Some argue that children have to discover for themselves how Christian values have contributed and can still contribute to our culture. Finally, it is argued that realisation of the value of Christianity and its culture advances the general development of the child.

Ad 7 (Table VI) Children respect other cultures. The majority of the respondents think this is an important Christian aim. Some respondents, arguing from another perspective, claim this is necessary for a society in which people are free and feel responsible for each other. Respondents differ in the value they accord the position that in introducing Christian culture or other cultures a certain critical attitude should be adopted.

Ad 9 (Table VI) Children are proud of their own culture. Most of the respondents fear that this aim will lead either to disapproval of, or disrespect for, other cultures and may lead to feelings of superiority. It is also argued that our culture has aspects of which one should not be proud.

One respondent claims that this item is exclusively valid for Christian culture, because Jesus is the 'Only Way' and Christians have a duty to point this out to children. Another respondent has a totally different argument for striving for this aim. In his school there are children of mixed cultural backgrounds and it is the children from non-Christian cultures whose pride and confidence in their traditions and faith are increased when a school acts in line with the tenet of this aim.

One respondent argued that the bible teaches equality among people, not among faiths. Only some will be blessed. Five respondents reject this idea, five respondents take a neutral stance and three respondents (fully) agree.

The same respondent stated that respect shines through in God's Word. Christian education should strive for a thorough initiation into the Christian culture. A multitude of cultures leads to doubt and superficiality. Most of the respondents do not share this opinion. According to one of them respect can only grow where children have knowledge of the ideas of others. Another observed that a strict mono-cultural approach is what leads to intolerance and discrimination. Only one other respondent partially shared this last opinion.

Most Desirable Future of Protestant Junior Schools

In the final part the respondents were asked to give their opinion on the most desirable future for Protestant schools.

The favourite scenario is that Protestant schools should change into 'program oriented schools' (Bulletin Extra, 1993). In these schools the teachers, in collaboration with and sustained by the board of the school, formulate their own school specific and contextualized program. In this program the religious aims and objectives, the pedagogical approach, and a plan of activities and lessons are formulated. This scenario was suggested in the first round by a respondent who stated that although the number of church-goers may be on the decrease this does not imply that religiosity as such is also declining. A modern up to date Christian school with a modern up to date program has the future in its hands. In the last round additional responses included the notions that:

- (1) program oriented schools comprise innovative elements of the Protestant tradition; and
- (2) Protestant education with a 'modern design' can show a distinct face in a secularised and multicultural society.

Conclusions

At least three tendencies are noticeable in the respondents' answers. Firstly, most of the respondents are of the opinion that Protestant schools should give new form and content to their Christian mission. Individual schools can no longer take refuge in a general problem solving strategy as practised by all Protestant schools, but must invent their own solutions, adequate to their specific situations, demands and wishes. The closed triangle of church-family-school has been broken open. Although the autonomous Protestant school seriously desires to incorporate the three bearers of Christian culture into one, it must nevertheless take responsibility for the content and form of school education via the scope and structure of its own program.

Secondly, the primacy of the development of the individual pupil is stressed. Most of the respondents argue that it is not the transmission of Christian tradition that has primacy, but the opportunities the school offers pupils to develop their individuality. This will not lead to extreme individualism, because the pupil is dependent on the teacher, his/her peers and the whole school community in developing him/herself.

Thirdly, most of the respondents endorse the view that it is not the school's responsibility to educate the pupil toward becoming a Christian believer. Some respondents argue that not the school but the church and the family should take responsibility here. Others state that although the school can contribute, the responsibility cannot lie solely with the school. Others argue that children can only be supported in making what must be a personal and autonomous decision. This does not mean that Christian rituals no longer have a place in the Protestant junior school. These aspects of the school's practice may help pupils to find their own way to a personal decision and help them in developing an integrated personal and committed attitude to life.

No consensus was reached on the majority of items in our Delphi-research project. The ideals on what constitutes, or should constitute, the specific character of a Protestant junior schools are diverse. The research, however, has provided an enormous fund of arguments, which can be used to legitimize a broad range of Protestant junior schools.

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